‘Urban Citizenship’ in a Multipolar World

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Citizenship and emergency

On 23 January 2020, the government of the People’s Republic of China imposed a quarantine on the central Chinese city of Wuhan, population eleven million. The quarantine measures, designed to counter the spread of the coronavirus, which is believed to have originated in the city, include a ban on trains and flights leaving the city and health checks for anyone leaving Wuhan by private car. Residents were instructed to stay in Wuhan unless they could provide ‘special reasons’ for leaving. The announcement of these measures was followed by a rush of people to the main train station and airport, and to hospitals to be tested for the virus, long queues for petrol, shortages of medical equipment and price inflation of food staples as residents sought to build stockpiles. The *Financial Times* reported that the ‘atmosphere was of a city preparing for a siege rather than Spring Festival celebrations’. The following day, China expanded the travel shutdowns to cover twelve cities with a combined population of over 36 million people.

I mention this developing situation to reinforce the cautionary trend in this debate over the merits and prospects of ‘urban citizenship’. What the Wuhan story vividly demonstrates is that the state retains the ability to impose a ‘state of exception’ on cities as on other territories within its control (Grimm 2015). The ability of a city resident to oppose such sovereign acts through the assertion of rights derived from ‘urban citizenship’ is lacking in an authoritarian context, but also appears limited in the context of democratic political systems.

Rainer Bauböck opened this debate by asking whether the demographic rise of cities presages a corresponding ‘decline of nation-states and a rise of cities as the dominant arenas of politics, democracy and citizenship’. In this context, is it meaningful to speak of ‘urban citizenship’, and can it be ‘emancipated’ from nationality? The notion of emancipation is applied both narrowly (to mean delinking ‘urban citizenship’ from a requirement to possess the nationality of the host state) and broadly (‘the emancipation of cities from the chokehold of the nation-state’). I share Bauböck’s ambivalence regarding the possibilities of ‘urban citizenship’, yet I question whether ‘citizenship’ is an apt concept for describing or encouraging the important role of cities.

I would like to make four somewhat related observations. First, as the Wuhan case illustrates, domestically the state’s preponderance of – legal and actual – powers tightly constrains the ability of cities to offer legally meaningful ‘citizenship’ to their residents. As Ralf Dahrendorf observed, citizenship is, ‘to begin with, an idea which finds its expression in law’ – it creates a ‘community under law’ in which the

privileged category of ‘citizen’ can exercise legal rights (Dahrendorf 1974). While city residents are often granted legal rights by virtue of their residency (e.g. the right to vote in municipal elections), such rights tend to be subordinate to the state’s legal order (city ordinances might be ruled unconstitutional), which is ultimately backed by the possibility of coercive enforcement. If, as the saying goes, a language is a dialect with an army and a navy, then ‘urban citizenship’ belongs decidedly to the category of ‘dialect’ rather than ‘language’.

Not quite the ‘end of power’

Second, on the international plane, states remain key building blocks of global governance, both in general and as providers of citizenship (or nationality) to natural persons (as well as to corporations, ships, etc.) in particular. While the agency of contemporary governments is indeed challenged and constrained by powerful non-state actors, such as transnational corporations and rating agencies (see, e.g., Naím 2014), states retain the ability to negotiate and to implement international agreements. It is often – and correctly – noted that states are failing to ‘solve’ global problems and that cities and other non-state actors are trying to pick up the slack. And yet, climate change, extinctions, pandemics, terrorism, etc., remain collective action problems. If coordinating almost two hundred states is difficult, I am not convinced that negotiating among hundreds or perhaps thousands of cities will be easier. Moreover, states tend to have great control over the means of implementation of international agreements.

The issue of refugees and asylum seekers is instructive. Certainly, a progressive and well-resourced city administration can ameliorate the harsh edges or neglect of national policy (although a progressive balance of forces in city politics is far from guaranteed, as Enrico Gargiulo and Lorenzo Piccoli demonstrate in their discussion of ‘mean cities’). However, the most progressive city administration, offering both abundant services to refugees and campaigning leadership consistent with the politics of its educated and cosmopolitan electorate, will be unable to prevent a national government from flouting its obligations under the Refugee Convention, for example, by turning away asylum seekers or punishing them for their irregular arrival. Since the preponderance of power is at the national level, surely the focus should be on getting the national policy settings right, and then on trying to strengthen international cooperation (such as through the negotiation of a Global Compact for Migration). In a democracy, the citizens who need to be convinced for any of this to really happen are the citizens of the whole country.

Citizenship is also integral to the unique role of states in global governance. It matters internationally because it enables individuals to claim protections under international law. There is no prospect for cities (which generally are not subjects of international law) to replicate this role. To take one example: the flight of businessman Carlos Ghosn from pre-trial detention in Japan to the safe haven of his native Lebanon. This colourful episode illustrates what Alex Aleinikoff refers to as the ‘relationship of citizenship to sovereignty’. It is Ghosn’s good fortune that among his three disclosed citizenships is one of Lebanon, a state which has no extradition agreement with Japan and which, as a matter of sovereign prerogative,

generally does not extradite its citizens. From the perspective of a fugitive from justice (or indeed from injustice), this is a citizenship worth having, one with (quoting Aleinikoff) a ‘pay-off in the real world’. Lebanon is widely regarded as a troubled and not especially powerful state, but the citizenship that even such a state can confer is worth far more to someone in Carlos Ghosn’s position than the notional ‘citizenship’ of any great metropolis. The reason is the general acceptance of the legal fiction of ‘state sovereignty’ and the corresponding dearth of acceptance of any notion of ‘city sovereignty’. This does not mean that ‘urban citizenship’ would be a bad thing, but it illustrates the distance between the concept and having anything like the impact that state citizenship has in the real world.

Cities as subjects of multipolarity

Third, faced with essentially global challenges requiring coordination among large powers, it seems more apt to encourage the emergence of larger communities of political organisation and solidarity (such as through the development of EU citizenship) than to focus on the construction of local polities. Today there can be no city that ‘is sufficient for herself both in peace and war’, as Perikles once boasted of Athens. Rather, cities must secure their interests not just in partnership with each other, but through close cooperation with national and provincial governments, the private sector, international and supranational institutions, standard-setters, and a host of other influential actors.

While there are forces of both integration and disintegration at work in the world, there is a clear trend favouring the cohering of multiple poles of power. The European Union is unique in its breadth and depth as a legal order, but there are other significant examples, such as the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union, the ASEAN Community, and initiatives to deepen market integration within the African Union. Beyond regional ordering, there is competition to shape global standards and transnational value chains (see, for example, China’s Belt and Road Initiative, or the contests over whose companies will dominate 5G and AI technologies). In sum, Yevgeny Primakov’s prediction of multipolarity as ‘the main vector of the world’s development’ appears to have been borne out (Primakov, 2003).

In a multipolar world system, scale – measured in economic and geopolitical power more than in simple population size – is a key factor determining the ability of an entity to make truly independent choices. Regarding the EU, it has sometimes been said that there are only two kinds of EU Member States: small states, and states that have yet to figure out that they are small. On their own, even the largest EU Member States would be in inferior bargaining positions to greater powers. However, as the world’s largest trading bloc, the EU can collectively defend its citizens’ interests and preferences through measures such as the General Data Protection Regulation and the European Green Deal. A corollary of this dynamic is that cities are essentially on the receiving end of multipolarity, able to exploit the opportunities or cope with the fallout of tectonic movements and frictions – e.g. the impacts of the US-China ‘trade war’ on a place like Hong Kong.

In a world of collective action problems, we should be seeking the expansion of solidarities, not their concentration. In a multipolar system, those of us who are in favour of liberal democracy also have the challenge to make transnational blocs more democratic. For example, in the case of the EU, members of the European Parliament elected from transnational lists would help to connect the European polity to its legislative process more directly. (While the EU is the clearest example of the 'transnational' aspect of the new citizenship narrative outlined by Bauböck, there are also developments in transnational participation and accountability in other regions – although we should not expect them to correspond to the EU model.) None of this is to deny that cities and local democracy have important roles to play, but these are better seen as building blocks of larger entities that can have far greater impact and can more capably defend citizen interests.

Participation and engagement, not citizenship

Fourth, and finally, even given the enduring domestic power of states, the ongoing significance of national citizenship and the emergence of a multipolar international system, there is no doubt that cities have untapped potential to contribute to tackling global challenges. However, I question whether 'urban citizenship' is the concept best-suited for unlocking this potential. Previous contributors to this debate have observed that 'urban citizenship' is not an alternative to national citizenship, and some have argued that the two can coexist (but see, *contra*, Josephine van Zeben's contribution). Even allowing for this coexistence, every choice has an opportunity cost. My view is that focusing on developing 'urban citizenship' risks missing the need to address the role that cities can play in tandem with other important actors. So, while I would not go as far as Avigail Eisenberg in doubting that 'enhancing urban democracy will help meet the global challenges we confront today', I do believe that a focus on internal city developments would miss more important dynamics. As Nir Barak observes, city networks such as the C40 have had real impacts on climate policy, but cities nevertheless 'lack the capacity' to solve the climate crisis in isolation from other actors. On the other hand, cities are key contributors to multi-stakeholder collaborations alongside national and provincial governments, the research sector, business and international organisations (Dodds, 2015). Multi-stakeholder partnerships aim to mobilise the distinct resources of each participant to meet a shared challenge, such as the various Sustainable Development Goals. Sustained focus on how cities can contribute to such partnerships would certainly be in keeping with the urgent challenges we face.

To conclude, while I support city residency rights that are not conditional on nationality, as suggested by Bauböck, I agree with Sandra Seubert that citizenship based on minimum residency requirements (or, alternatively, residency status based on maximal rights) is equally possible and desirable at the national level. Many countries already provide for this. I am also sceptical of the prospects and desirability of emancipating 'urban citizenship' from the nation-state in the broader sense. Cities are irreplaceable centres of creativity, capital and policy experimentation, but they are not going to become unmoored from their national hinterlands anytime soon, any more than an independent London is going to remain in the EU. Rather, the

challenge and opportunity are to harness the unique potential of cities within the context of national and, increasingly, supranational entities.

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